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The VVM Strategy for Institutional Success

By William B. Calder

Abstract

Changes to educational institutions, such as mandate, leadership, financial resources, academic program offerings, etc. can often lead to a reassessment of their declared values, vision, and their mission (or referred to as VVM). Unless an institution explicitly develops and articulates its values, vision, and mission, and until it is clearly understood by stakeholders, and widely supported, then the institution itself is at the mercy of everyday events. However, an institution's governing body and its leaders are required to go beyond short-term or daily events. A comprehensive strategy involving the exploration of values and guiding principles, the creation of a vibrant future and the defining of results for its customers can soon set an institution on the right path of sustainability and success.

Introduction

There is little doubt that community colleges and technical institutes are one of the greatest social inventions of the 20th century. Their evolution over several decades is a remarkable educational, social and economic accomplishment and positive recognition of their contribution continues as they move forward into the 21st century.

Generally, higher education has enjoyed unprecedented levels of public support. Stakeholders' opinions, including politicians, have viewed higher education as a virtual panacea for many societal ills, such as complex social and economic challenges.

Overall, however, higher education suffers from a fundamental weakness of every created public institution, that is, over time institutions become 'overly regulated', possibly inflexible in their operation, and as some observers would describe it, experience a 'hardening of the policies' which govern them. This rigidity of practice underlies the unwillingness by most institutions to rethink old paradigms or embrace new ones in addressing a preferred future and a clearer sense of strategic direction.

Key to its governing policies, institutional guidelines and practices are well-developed core statements around an institution's values, a cogent vision, and a strong mission (VVM). However, a well-crafted VVM strategy that focuses on the development and articulation of these important statements can create a unity purpose, and a call to action for revitalizing an institution and its stakeholder

groups. The process of re-examining these educational cornerstones injects new ways of thinking, acting and doing and can set an institution on a path of a preferred future.

Institutional values frame the starting point of any strategic thinking and planning processes. These values form an institution's collective beliefs; however, all too often over time they soon fade away and become less useful as guiding principles to an institution. While they are in fact a statement of beliefs, these values are seldom referenced in policy development work or even "operationalized" through institutional practices, procedures, or guidelines.

In addition to an institution's value sets, its vision, while still an ideal or dream, can often become too elusive for many institutional stakeholders. While it provides an answer to the question "what does success look like?" it can be a bit ethereal to those task-oriented individuals who look for tangible performance targets or solid metrics for their institution. Key performance measures can show whether or not improvements are producing the intended results. What an effective way to respond to an institution's visioning questions!

Following a vision quest, the mission is often a misunderstood statement of purpose for many stakeholders. Frequently it is written in such a way that often reflects an institution's activities or actions (Calder, 2002), possibly its links to industry or faculty achievements rather than a true reflection of the educational outcomes for its customers. As a consequence, it becomes increasingly clear that in higher education the means, that is the tools used such as partnerships or alliances and its faculty, may become much more important actions to identify than the end, which is the results for its learners (customers).

Institutional Values: We Are What We Value

Institutions are made up of rather diverse groups of people, and successful institutions possess value systems just as people do. Institutional values, then, are those ideals, qualities, standards, or beliefs that an institution holds to be simply and essentially worthwhile.

Board members often shape institutional values by bringing their own personal value sets to the governance process. Sometimes appointments by government and possibly specific identified sector groups (e.g. health, business) are made to governing Boards to reflect preferred value sets. For example, there may be political and economic leanings, cultural/religious traditions and practices, as well as social sensitivities. We know that educational institutions play a significant role in the fabric of the community. The values of these members can make a successful Board a vital element in an effective institution. Their guiding principles, defined by their value sets, drive an institution forward, informing its vision, mission, and its resultant strategic priorities.

Since we, as individuals, are interdependent with others and are usually members of a collective work unit (academic department, division, service area, etc.) within a larger organizational system, our 'collective values' are important influences upon our work related behaviour. Translated into operational terms this means that our personal values, our collective 'team' values, and our institutional values all impact the educational environment that we help to create. Human values, then, reflect in the foundations upon which we build our educational programs and services as well as the structure and practices of our institutions.

A statement of values once identified and articulated can have a dramatic effect on how an institution operates. Some institutions and their leaders may choose to state values as they identify with the institution itself that is a place where people interact, work, and learn. For example, an institution may state it is a place "where everyone shares goals and works together to strengthen teaching and learning" or perhaps it epitomizes a place "where diversity is valued and pursued." Others may address their belief systems as those personal interactions among professional colleagues (e.g., respect, honesty, ethical treatment), while others may look at their values more in terms of alliances or partnerships focusing on cooperation, teamwork, and collaboration. Regardless of the value orientation, these beliefs become key guiding principles upon which plans of all types (human resource, strategic, academic) are formulated and informed decisions are ultimately made.

Operationally, collective values significantly impact the learning environment. An individual's values and his/her "collective" beliefs shape and influence our words, our procedures, and our actions within an institution. Institutional values are formed through an inherent culture, by the academic disciplines that dominate constituent groups, as well as the strong roles and role models that govern institutional operations. Culture values may include such ideas around economic orientations about how an institution uses its resources (e.g., financial revenue and investments), stakeholder relationships and their development, risk taking, and the quality and acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Institution discipline-based values are derived from the intellectual paradigms and strategies of various academic fields of study. Intuitively we would expect that engineers and accountants would have different views concerning the appropriate goals and priorities of an institution than, for example, psychologists or historians. These discipline views often permeate the value sets of an institution

Role-based values emanate from one's primary role grouping within an institution. These role models (faculty, students, administrators, alumni, etc.), as is the case with discipline-based values, may assume different views concerning the future and proper institutional directions. As such the intertwining dynamics of these

various group types can promote a degree of instability to the value sets of an institution as a whole or create a tension which causes confusion and misinformation as to the genuine values an institution holds close to its operation. Consistent and congruent value sets assures us that all members are in agreement about what is important to an institution. These collaborative values drive decisions about what priorities will be the focus of any strategic and/or operational plan.

It follows, then, that before setting out on the development of vision and mission statements, it is important to identify or at least clarify those things that stakeholders hold important -- a description of their core values or guiding principles. This action assists in the affirmation of an institution's value sets.

Visioning: Can You See What I See

A well-developed vision answers a fundamental question: what is being built here at this institution? Effective statements are not long, but clearly describe what you are building or at least addressing what success looks like (Calder, 2006). It seems like a rather key statement for any educational institution to produce and clearly articulate. Yet all too often its mere existence is mired in stakeholder controversy or never-ending debate which in turn can either cause the statement to be "shelved until further notice" or portrayed with ambiguous descriptors that only adds confusion to those educational leaders charged with its implementation.

However, a well-crafted vision statement has the potential to be a very powerful piece of communication. Unfortunately many well intentioned statements don't quite grasp that potential. Indeed many do paint a cogent picture which creates a preferred future for an institution and builds institutional capacity and commitment in reaching the vision; however without such a convincing statement many institutions flounder and pull in different directions, while there energy becomes diverted and diminishes over time.

A vision is a tool and not a solution to a strategic planning process, and when commitment is lacking by stakeholders this valuable tool is soon cast aside. Therefore, in order for this tool to do the job and enable an institution to achieve its vision, there must be institutional "buy-in" and commitment, which means the vision must be persistently used as a guide for every operational decision.

Outcomes and Results for Customers

Until something has truly happened to individuals and/or a community (the main customers of colleges and institutes), an institution has had no real results; it has only had the best of intentions. The mission says explicitly why you do what you do, not the means by which you do it. It is not concerned with faculty, facilities, finances, or even funding but rather an expression of the

results it produces for its customers. A mission is not only strategic in its focus but often carries with it intensely personal and philosophical overtones. For example, it can bring up existential type questions such as “what are we all about?” Do colleges and institutions make significant contributions to community, social, and economic development? Despite personal and philosophical overtones, a mission provides clear purpose and direction to which an institution is dedicated. For some institutions, the mission takes on concrete utility, not just one of rhetorical or inspirational value. However, for other institutions the mission can sometimes be a lofty purpose, such as “to graduate empowered, effective citizens” (Calder, 2002).

Colleges and institutes exist for the sake of their mission. They exist to make a difference in the life of their customers either as individuals or as a group or community. Therefore, a mission can assist an institution to serve as a basis for making better decisions because the institution knows its direction; it serves to unite the organization around a single statement of purpose; to attract and retain students because of a clear focus; and it serves to form lasting alliances since if you know who you are you won’t waste resources trying to be someone else. An effective mission reflects a match of institutional opportunities, competence, and commitment to its stated purpose.

A mission statement is the heart of a governing Board and “owned” by Board members first and foremost. For any Board, a mission statement can be the most powerful single action it takes and it could be successfully argued that if a Board is not involved in determining the mission, why should it be involved in anything else? We know that arriving at a mission is not a quick or easy activity. Knowing exactly what your “reason to be” is all about is one of the best ways to exhibit confidence and knowledge to prospective users, and the community at large (Calder, 2002).

There is a strong need to develop a mission that is the broadest expression of what is a doable purpose. It is a statement of how learners and communities will be different due to its existence.

What is the ultimate result of an institution’s work? Again, it is important to emphasize that the mission is about outcomes for others. The change is the mission not the activities. No institution exists just to try, that is why defining a mission begins by describing results.

Developing a mission statement within an institution can be a healthy, successful experience. The entire process allows all those involved to discover their strengths (to build on) and weaknesses (to discard or correct them). Whatever a mission statement says it lays valuable groundwork for a further definition of purpose (Calder, 2002).

Institutional Vitality

The proper sequencing of planning processes (strategic or otherwise) is extremely important. The establishment of institutional values or value sets unquestionably comes first in any process and also first when it comes to trying to garner a collective voice from stakeholders. Exploring values from constituent groups adds an important perspective to a comprehensive institutional VVM strategy. While a difficult process, consensus around shared values can be a powerful statement about how an institution is governed and how it makes decisions on key directions. It also assists in clarifying the types of relationships it wants to have with all those involved as it moves its strategic agenda forward.

An all-inclusive institutional VVM strategy works well because each of the component parts flows nicely into the next important sequence of the process. Therefore, institutional values form the basis for decision making and assist an institution in establishing its vision -- perhaps the most difficult of all statements in a VVM strategy. While the mission looks at specific outcomes for customers, a vision is the collective dream of how an institution will look, act and possibly feel usually within a certain time-frame. Undoubtedly, there is remarkable difference between being an institution with a vision statement and being one that has become a true visionary institution.

Ask any staff member or member of a governing Board what their institution's vision or mission truly is and you might be surprised at the variety and complexity of their responses. However, beyond these statements lies the real question: do they, in fact, represent a clearly stated purpose (mission) and a preferred future (vision)? While the words of these statements should flow freely from stakeholders when they are asked, they too often come across as broad interpretations of what they really are and mean, if they can be addressed at all.

A planned VVM strategy can be a difficult task at the best of times. Those individuals not attuned to the processes of formulating statements around values, a vision and a mission may find the time, commitment and the exercises involved in the processes a "waste of time". Agreed, it can become cumbersome for many individuals because it involves a mindset that is focused on statements about "big picture" thinking and future perspectives. Education, as a learning process, offers exciting opportunities in which open dialogue and discussion become the norm in operational matters. Of course, the classroom fosters this kind of behaviour as faculty and students explore academic discipline issues and content. It is and should be encouraged. As well, the business side of education needs to be addressed. Ongoing processes often dominate over meaningful progress in operational matters; there can be prolonged input into an issue without substantive output; or endless dialogue over significant, tangible development; and often times the preservation of the process itself becomes a major objective. If this is the case then the development of a comprehensive VVM strategy can play a "backseat" role to meaningful progress.

Alfred and Carter (2000) noted that the simple “develop and deliver” strategy used by first generation educational institutions would not allow them to survive in today’s competitive market. Therefore, they suggest that for institutions to move forward they need to work with faculty and staff to affirm institutional core values, visualize for the future around concepts of collaboration and change, and create a focus (mission) that provides value to customer outcomes. Thoughtful statements of institutional success and valued results for learners, which are clearly in line with a broad VVM strategy, play a much needed role in sustainable institutional vitality.

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Wm. B. Calder is Provost and Vice President Academic at Northern Alberta Institute of Technology in Edmonton, AB, Canada. He can be reached at: bcalder@nait.ca

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